DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 552 PS 014 018

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TITLE Working Parents, Schools and Children in Self-Care.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS After School Programs; Educational Legislation; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Emotional Development; Emotional Problems; *Employed Parents; Maturity (Individuals); *Parent Attitudes; Pilot Projects; Population Trends; *School Age Day Care; *School Role
IDENTIFIERS *Latchkey Children; School Facilities Child Care Act

ABSTRACT

Several topics centering on children in self-care, or latchkey children, are discussed. Initially presented are demographic and background data related to the emergence of domestic situations in which children spend substantial amounts of time at home unattended by adults. In subsequent discussion, the incidence of unsupervised children at home is indicated, the need of many American families for before- and after-school child care arrangements is pointed out, and the attitudes of parents concerning the latchkey arrangement are discussed. Additionally considered are the attitudes and feelings children have about the latchkey experience. Special attention is given to pressure to mature rapidly, which may be imposed on children relegated to self-care, and to the responses of schools and the federal government in providing school-based child care services. Ways some schools are and others are not meeting the needs of latchkey children are indicated, and federal initiatives addressing the problem are described. The concluding section asserts that the most promising long-term solution to the problem is to coordinate the school calendar with parents' working schedules, either by lengthening the school day and year or by shortening parents' work year, week, and day. (RH)

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ED238552

PS 014018

WORKING PARENTS, SCHOOLS AND CHILDREN IN SELF-CARE

by THOMAS J. LONG

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The Context

During the past generation women have been flooding the labor force. This is true of all women, regardless of marital status, age of their children or their ethnic background. The dramatic increase in the number of working women has occurred in all parts of the country and at every socioeconomic level. Sixty percent of all American families include two adult workers who work full-time outside the home. Twenty percent of all American families are headed by a single parent. Most single parents are working mothers.

Among working mothers, the fastest growing segment are those with preschool children. By 1982, 50 percent of all mothers with children less than six years of age were in the labor force, a fourfold increase in thirty years. Not only are there more women with young children working today, but they are entering or returning to the labor force earlier after giving birth. Among women with infants under one year of age, 40 percent of single mothers and a third of married women are working.

Women, like men, work largely out of economic need. Two-thirds of the women in the labor force are single, widowed, separated, divorced or living with a partner who earns less than $10,000 a year. For married couples the second income means that more than 90 percent live above the government's official poverty

threshold for a family of four. By contrast, one in every three families headed by a female, single head of household lives below the poverty threshold.

During the past thirty years, demographic, economic and attitudinal changes in American society have created a spiraling demand for child care as well as a shift in the existing supply and demand configurations in the child care market. Between 1958 and 1978 the number of children of full-time, working mothers who were cared for in their own homes, either by a relative or non-relative declined by one-half. During that same period, family day care, that is care in the provider's home, increased by 20 percent, and the proportion of children in day care centers increased by 10 percent.

The increase in demand for preschool child care and the fact that preschoolers generally remain in substitute care arrangements for more hours each day than do school age children has accounted for a more rapid growth in the number of child care slots for preschoolers than for school age children. There simply is more economic incentive for providers to create child care slots for children who will use their facility six to ten hours a day rather than two to four hours a day.

But even the growth in the number of child care slots for preschoolers will likely not keep up with the demand for slots during the 1980's. In 1982 there were 18.5 million children under age six in the United States. Of this number, 8.5 million had working mothers. Census projections indicate that there will be over 10 million preschoolers with mothers in the labor force by 1990.

The School-age Latchkey Child

In 1978 the United States began experiencing an increase in the birth rate for the first time in many years. By 1984 these children will begin entering first grade. School-age children constitute a sizable child care population now. It will increase in the coming years.

Today a large and growing number of households opt to leave their children in self-care or the care of a minor sibling during non-school hours when the parents themselves are unavailable. These are the so-called "latchkey children". The exact number of school-age children who spend some time most days without adult supervision has never been established. But it is safe to say, based on reports from a number of studies (Divine-Hawkins, 1983; Hughes, 1982; Long & Long, 1982, 1983; McMurray & Kazanjian, 1982; Simons & Bohen, 1982) that no less than 25 percent of American school-age children living in families with full-time working parents use this arrangement. Some say (Long & Long, 1983; Simons & Bohen, 1982) that 5 to 6 million is a conservative estimate of the number of latchkey children between the ages of 5 and 13. Self-care, or the care by a sibling age 14 or younger, is the second most frequently used care arrangement for school-age children in the United States (Divine-Hawkins, 1983). It is surpassed only by parent care during out of school hours.

Parents and Out-of-School Care for School-age Children

Many American families need out-of-school care for their school-age children both before and after school. One study shows that about two-thirds of working parents care for their children in the morning on a daily basis, verses nearly 100 percent of the families surveyed in which at least one parent did not work full-time (Divine-Hawkins, 1983). During after school hours, however, only about one-third of full-time working parents reported that they provided daily care for their school-age children. Even in households with at least one parent not working full-time, only 3 in 5 parents reported providing care for their school-age children in the afternoon. About two-thirds of families with full-time working parents report using non-parent care on a daily basis. For the other third care arrangements appear to be haphazard or non-existent.

For the most part, parents using the latchkey arrangement slip into self-care by default. They find that work demands preclude their continuous supervision of their own children. They cannot find available or affordable adult child care. Their children resist attending child care programs that are not age appropriate. Parents then begin experimenting with self-care on an occasional basis. Nothing serious happens, their children seem to be able to cope and the parents incrementally increase the duration and frequency of self-care until their children are averaging two and one-half hours of self-care per working day (Long & Long, 1982). But for many parents, especially single parents, the need for alternate child care arises precipitously as a result of a separation, divorce or death in the family. In such cases, self care often begins one day and never ceases unless the

composition of the family changes (as through remarriage) and family circumstances change (as when mom decides to stop working outside the home).

Parental Ambivalence About the Latchkey Arrangement

Parents are ambivalent about the latchkey arrangement. This is partially due to the lack of clear indications as to the extent of the liability this arrangement causes. No one knows if children in self-care are involved in more deaths, accidents, illnesses or missed school days and are more obese, take more drugs, have poorer family relationships, do less well in school, or engage in more sexual acting out. It is also true that children often do not complain about the bad feelings they have about being in self-care, and that parents often perceive self-care as their only real child care alternative.

Parental ambivalence about self or sibling care is experienced in a variety of ways. Most parents report more or less satisfaction with their current care arrangements, even latchkey arrangements, and fail to express a preference for other arrangements. In the Divine-Hawkins study (1983) almost all (90 - 95 percent) of the families using self or sibling care reported that there were advantages to this arrangement. On the other hand, when parents were asked when they would feel comfortable leaving a child at home without adult supervision, they indicated at an age older than when they actually began this practice. Moreover, when parents were asked about their greatest concern when choosing a child care arrangement, they responded that they

wanted their children to be adequately supervised.

About half of the parents who use a self or sibling care arrangement for their children report that they are worried about specific problems that might arise. The main areas of parental concern are that their children might have an accident or that someone might break-in.

Children Protect Their Parents

Despite the fact that about half of all former latchkey children indicate that they harbor a growing and lingering resentment toward their parents because of their latchkey arrangement (Long & Long, 1983), most latchkey children fail to express this resentment to their parents until later in life, if at all. Nor do children report most of the difficulties they experience in the latchkey situation to their parents. There are powerful forces at work to preclude such expressions.

Children often have not learned to identify and effectively express their concerns. Parents attempt explanations to their children for the need for self-care. Usually these explanations are strongly weighted by parentally perceived practicalities. Children who love and need their parents generally accept their parents' explanations and determine not to add to the burden they see their parents carrying.

Children in self-care are reinforced for being capable and responsible, and are hesitant to risk losing these reinforcers by complaining about the very situation that provides the reinforcement. And many children, especially those who have been

in preschool day care, often believe that the alternative to self-care is being placed in a personally unacceptable parent-substitute care arrangement. Further, not being in self-care is often loaded with social penalties for children, in that peers often deride school-age children who continue to be in center care or in the care of a baby sitter. And self-care has some intrinsic reinforcers. It often provides the child with a sense of personal freedom and responsibility that other care arrangements do not.

When the Longs (1982, 1983) interviewed latchkey children and former latchkey children, they found that children had strong feelings associated with self-care including feelings of fear, loneliness, boredom and resentment. Divine-Hawkins (1983) and her colleagues discovered that children in self-care said that they would feel comfortable without adult supervision at a later age than when they were actually in this situation. For both children and parents the contrasts between reported values and family practices regarding self or sibling care were more pronounced the younger the latchkey child.

Driving Children to Maturity

In this complex and hurried society parents often want their children to mature rapidly. Parents see high achievement as their children's ticket to success, and maturity and achievement are often linked in parents' thinking. Many parents take it as blame when a teacher says that their child has not yet matured.

While physical development and associated motor and mental

activity progresses at different rates for different children for purely biological reasons not under parental control, parents often seem to lack the patience to allow for normal development or the trust to accept that their child will develop. Parents also often want their children to mature more rapidly in order to relieve parental stress caused by child rearing.

Parental anxiety is often passed on to children, emerging in the child as stress. Under stress children often cope by over-structuring their environments. This characteristic has been the trade-mark of low-income children for decades. These children often appear to attain independence early in response to environmental pressures, living in poverty, in single-parent families or in families in which all the adults work outside the home. These situations demand growing up rapidly.

As some characteristics attributed mainly to the low-income families of the 1940's have spread throughout the middle class, the pressures on an increasing number of children to act grown-up have also spread. The consequence seems to be that children act as expected, but may be suffering the results of premature life structuring: lowered achievement, increased social and emotional problems and a general distrust that adults can be expected to respond to the needs of children. This latter perception can decrease the willingness of children to be givers, since being an adequate giver in later life seems to depend on the sense of trust children develop as they learn that they can have their own needs met by loving care givers. Failure to become a giver seems to negatively effect the child's sense of self-worth which can eventually lead to a greater sense of social isolation and family

disfunction.

While it is too early to determine the broad effects of the latchkey situation on such issues as self-esteem, the ability to be a social contributor and a generous parent, there is a growing concern among parents and professionals that self-care will have these effects, although perhaps not in the dramatic way they are observed among severely neglected or abused children.

We are hearing reports from an increasing number of former latchkey children who have been in personal therapy for a number of years that the latchkey experience has had a dramatic negative effect on their adult development. While we have not yet confirmed or formulated all the characteristics of what we are beginning to call the "latchkey syndrome", certainly increased fear, a heightened sense of social isolation, a lowered sense of self worth, resentment toward parents and a drift toward occupations that while they might be creative demand less social interaction appear to be possible associated characteristics.

Nor do we know all the factors that reduce the possibility of a latchkey child experiencing long-term negative effects. Some factors that appear to help are: warm and close parent-child relationships that are seen as such by the child; a safe neighborhood that both parent and child perceive as safe; a visibly safe home; the presence of one or more adults available in the neighborhood, known by the child, to whom he or she can turn in an emergency; careful structuring of the time children spend in self-care; a parent whose job is near their home; parents who are available by telephone; and children who do not begin the latchkey experience at too young an age (much before 12), or find

themselves left unattended for too long (much more than 2 hours a day), or who are given too much responsibility (an overload of child care or household duties).

The possibility that even the supposed benefits of self-care, an increased sense of personal responsibility, independence and the learning of survival skills, may be had at too great a cost seems to be increasing the feelings of guilt among many parents. Yet the practicalities of many family situations seem to demand that children cope with self-care despite possible negative consequences.

The Schools And Latchkey Children

As parent awareness develops, both as to the number of latchkey children in the society and the possible negative consequences attached to this arrangement, more parents are turning to the schools for help. There certainly is not a school administrator alive, even those most staunch believers that schools should only emphasize academic goals and changes, who has failed to feel the public demand for schools to accept more and more responsibility for the education, care and rearing of children.

In Anne Arundel County, Maryland, for example, an extended day program, started with federal funds in 1982 in a single public school, spawned five other similar programs in the same county without federal funds. Once county parents saw that schools could be responsive, they pressed local principals to provide extended day services for their children. These new programs are run only

on parents' contributed fees, amounting to about $10 per child/per week, volunteer help, and the school's contributed space and utilities. Only the program director at each location is paid.

Not all of the Anne Arundel programs are working well. Those that are have an unusually committed principal and tend to be located in more affluent neighborhoods where the fee is not a burden and parents have longer histories of using for fee child care successfully. The important issue is, however, that many parents quickly turned to their schools for child care when they discovered that care could be made available, even for a fee.

The School Facilities Child Care Act introduced in Congress in 1983 by Senators Riegle and Pell in the Senate (S 1531) and Representatives Schroeder, Burton and Ferramo in the House (HR 39-78) is another indication that the use of school facilities is perhaps another remedy for leaving children in self-care. School facilities are built for children and it seems only logical to extend their use to provide care for children during the hours parents work.

The School Facilities Child Care Act further encourages the development of partnerships among parents, school personnel and child care providers to serve the interests of school-age children. The idea of partnership development runs at cross-grain to the self contained classroom mentality of many teachers and school administrators. Many principals worry about the excessive use latchkey programs would make of their facilities during after-school hours, and many teachers refuse to allow anyone other than themselves access to their classrooms. The result is that needed programs are often denied access to school buildings.

Generally extended day programs that are housed in elementary schools depend upon the availability of at least one unused or under used room in the school. Seldom has a program been established that depends upon the cooperative use of a classroom, for example, during differing periods of the day (at least not until the extended day program becomes established). Fortunately, there has been a period of declining enrollments in some areas creating a number of unused or under used rooms. Some farsighted administrators have seen their own best interests served by finding creative ways to use vacant school space.

Extended day programs are natural tenants. They make appropriate use of the space and attract transfer students to the school. This usually increases the school's average daily attendance during the regular school day and thereby the school's state subsidy. Programs, like that in Arlington County, Virginia, testify that elementary school-age students can spend pleasant and fruitful lives at school for more than 10 hours a day. The Arlington program operates in every elementary school in the county. It now serves approximately 1300 students through grade six.

Hopefully school personnel will become better advocates for children so that needed school based child care programs can be developed despite associated inconveniences. Many of the children who will need child care services throughout the eighties are already born. And unless current patterns differ, an increasing number of these children will be latchkey children.

Schools will be looked to to provide not only child care alternatives but to sponsor, if not teach, survival skills

training and to serve as temporary havens during emergencies for children who largely remain in self-care. Even at present schools are being forced to accept extended care functions for children whose parents drop them at the school door well before the school is officially open and who advise their children to remain at school "as long as possible" after school in order to minimize the amount of time these children would otherwise have to remain at home unattended.

Often the standard mentality of school personnel is to see the public as demanding that the schools do everything; to complain about being overworked, under paid and under appreciated, and then to be unwilling to cooperate with other resources available in the community that are able to respond to real community needs. Change is afoot, however. Survival skills training can and is being taught in school buildings by Campfire Councils, Boy or Girl Scout Chapters, 4-H Clubs, and YMCA and YWCA's. Extended day programs can and are being staffed in schools by paid professionals, different from regular school personnel (as in Minneapolis), by YMCA leaders (as in Dade County, Florida) and by trained volunteers (as in Baltimore City, Maryland).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has funded a pilot project in Fairfax County, Virginia, to experiment with the feasibility of safe-home, check-in programs in neighborhoods. A project that offers great promise, if the problems of liability and zoning can be overcome. But could schools not establish themselves as at least safe harbors for children who might need help in an emergency between the hours of 7 a.m. and 6 p.m.?

Some school administrators believe that schools are already these safe harbors. In reality many schools are not open or staffed past 4:30 or 5 p.m.. Schools do not normally advertise themselves as the place for children to turn for adult emergency assistance during out-of-school hours. Seldom is there a specific school staff member designated as a qualified emergency resource. Before or after school emergency help is often haphazard when it is requested. And teacher training does not normally train teachers to know what to do in most emergencies.

Some schools are negligent when children are injured during the school day, let alone before or after school. On occasion administrators sent injured or sick children back to unattended houses because parents or an emergency back-up could not be reached. One eleven year old in Burke, Virginia, who fractured her wrist during a gym class, was sent home despite the school staff's failure to reach her mother, a single parent. It took the girl an hour and one-half after arriving home to locate her mother. When queried later, the school administrator explained that he had no staff person who had the time to wait with the child in a hospital emergency room.

School personnel frequently act as though mothers are home to receive their children. Many teachers and administrators are surprised when they find a majority of latchkey children in their classes. One Boston teacher said, "30 of 33 children." And a Glen Burnie, Maryland, teacher found 24 of 28 children were regularly unattended after school.

Schools must initiate even the simple expedient of requesting more back-up emergency contacts for children than were necessary

in the past. More than this, schools must consider better strategies for emergency care of sick or injured children when their parents cannot be reached. School staffs can no longer simply release children who become ill or injured at school, even at the end of the school day, if they know that the child will not be received by a competent adult at home. Working parents travel an average of 21 miles per day commuting to work. Even when a parent is reached at work, the time it takes to transfer from the work site to the school or home can be lengthy.

Some communities are looking for ways to provide sick child care during school days for the children of working parents. All too often sick children remain at home alone when ill, or are sent to school ill so that their parents do not have to lose a day of work. In many cases these children spend all day in the nurse's room and still are released to spend the rest of the day in an unattended home until a parent arrives.

Cooperation Between Parents, Schools and Community Groups

Parents, schools and community groups have a real opportunity to cooperate as the result of the increased need of families for child care choices that afford parents a chance to earn an income. Cooperation is the key to improved services for children.

Schools and school personnel do not need to be all things to all people. Schools exist within communities that can respond to needs as they are known. School personnel must acquaint themselves with a wide range of community resources in order to be better advocates for children. Then they must determine to be advocates

and willing partners with those elements of the community able and willing to cooperate.

The actions mentioned above offer only short-term solutions, however. The most promising long-tern solution appears to be to readjust the school calendar to conform to the world of work. American students spend much less time in school than other industrialized countries. In England and other European countries it is not unusual for students to spend eight hours a day at school 220 days a year. In the United States, by contrast, the typical school day lasts six hours and the school year 180 days (A Nation At Risk , 1983).

Lengthening the school day and year can cut sharply into the time students find themselves unattended while it provides more time for learning. Such a step will surely demand major restructuring of the curriculum, but national priorities and realities in the market place demand this anyhow (A Nation At Risk , 1983). Alternatively the work year, week and day could be shortened; a possibility that is not altogether remote. Pressure is mounting to reduce the work week. It is possible that the time will soon come that the work week and year and the school week and year will be the same, obviating many of the problems of self care. Until then, schools, parents and community groups must work more closely together in more flexible partnership arrangements to both advocate for children and respond to the needs of children in a changing world.

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Biography

THOMAS J. LONG is associate professor of education and coordinator of the program in counseling and guidance at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.. He is co-author of The

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